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ABSTRACT

The paper describes one approach to the school to work transition problems of handicapped students. The model features community involvement, on-site vocational assessment, prevocational instruction in the junior high school, on-site supervision, and interagency collaboration. The need for a functional curriculum is emphasized, including appropriate training activities, functional academic skills, social skills, and supervised work experience. An outline of content areas for a comprehensive secondary curriculum is offered, including industrial training and formal vocational assessment (grades 9 and 10), functional academics, referral to vocational rehabilitation and full time employment in the summer prior to the senior year (grade 11), and social skills curriculum and vocational and/or therapeutic counseling (grade 12). (CL)

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Task Force for the Improvement of Secondary Special Education in New Hampshire

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TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK

Introduction

Since the passage of the Education of the Handicapped Act (PL 94-142) in 1975, school-based secondary programs have received increasingly more attention, as witnessed by the literature noted at the end of this paper. These programs have, to varying degrees between and within each state, contained the key elements of academics, pre-vocational, and vocational instruction.

Recently, educators have become more aware of the necessity to prepare secondary special education students for real-work situations, such as those encountered by any worker in any job. Whether we call these "survival skills", job-readiness skills, or work attitudes and habits, the goal is the same - to prepare young adults for entry into a workplace that is very different from most school structures.

Employer expectations, reliable transportation, competing personal and social agendas, freedom, friction with co-workers, and a changing marketplace are only some of the many factors that come into play, no matter who you are or where you work.

The successful bridging of this school-to-work, generically referred to as "transition", is now a top priority of the Federal Office of Education, and was the focus of a national conference held in Boston in March, 1985.

What is "Transition"?

As defined by Martin, Schneider, Rusch & Geske,

> ...transitional employment refers to the process of training social, vocational, and daily living skills needed for competitive employment and then placing and maintaining trained persons at community jobs.

Surveys conducted in several states, including one compiled in 1985 by the New Hampshire Developmental Disabilities Council, consistently find that large numbers of students with special needs have left our public schools without the salable skills needed to secure a job. Often facing unemployment and underemployment, many remain dependent on society for their basic needs. In addition to the economic drain on our economy, the loss of human potential is staggering. Further, the issues around self-image and self-esteem can take their own toll on the handicapped individual.

When viewed as a process, "transition" is an attempt to deal with all of the above in a systematic and holistic way.

Employment Trends

At a time when the availability of employment is diversifying for everyone, more disabled young people are recognizing the importance of work as the key to their participation in society; additionally, new technologies are increasingly used to habilitate people with severe handicaps (OECD, 1983). Simultaneously, the problem of youth unemployment is epidemic:

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> "More than half the total of unemployed in our country are under 24 years of age. While teenagers account for about one-tenth of the nation's labor force, they represent almost one-quarter of the unemployed" (Higgins, 1978).

In two separate studies, it was found that the vast majority of handicapped high school age students were excluded from regular vocational education (Johnson, 1980; Hippolitus, 1980).

Typically, those handicapped students who do go on to work experience in the community are identified as mild or borderline in their disabilities. Youth employment projects sponsored through CETA demonstrated conclusively that "the more a young person knows about the world of work, the higher his or her wages and occupational status are likely to be" (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1980).

From a State perspective, vocational educators in New Hampshire are being called upon in increasing numbers to work with the handicapped. According to the State Employment and Training Council, the most persistent barriers to employment include 1) lack of skills, 2) lack of education, and 3) lack of work experience. The foregoing barriers are especially prominent for the youthful jobseekers (State Plan, 1982). A separate study by the NH Developmental Disabilities Council confirmed that barriers to employment included 1) Economic and Benefit disincentives, 2) Employer Perceptions, Attitudes, 3) Family beliefs and concerns, 4) Staff and Professional Perceptions, 5) Lack of Inter-Agency Networking and collaboration, 6) Transportation, in that order.

Success in Academics, but...

During the ten years since the passage of P.L. 94-142, special education has undergone a vast transformation in providing services to students with special needs at the elementary, junior and senior high school levels. Only within the past two years have special educators begun to look at students who are now ready to exit the high school programs and to evaluate students on how successful they will be as they enter the work world. In most cases, we find that years have been spent teaching academics to students with little or no practical application of those skills and how they relate to a work situation.

Although the concept of transition from school to work may vary from one area to another given different resources and population of students, the framework of the program model may be similar. The goal of the program is to make it possible for handicapped adolescents thought to be unemployable to become productive members of the workforce.

The following represents one possible approach to the transition challenge:

The Model

Public-Private Partnerships

A community should first be surveyed to identify possible work placements, with employers from the community involved as members of advisory committees. A partnership between the school and community is essential, with private agents called on to establish on-site supervised work placements which emphasize appropriate social and vocational skills. On-site vocational assessment has proven to be of much greater value than assessment in a school situation where students are waiting for the bell to ring to go to the next class, and have no idea how vocational assessment today will affect work attitudes, interest and ability. The student usually finds it irrelevant to employment and the "big picture" after high school.

In the junior high school, pre-vocational skills should be taught through home economics, industrial arts and courses that relate academics as functional skills. Students should be involved in in-house, supervised work placement (e.g. cafeteria, custodians) where they can obtain additional skills, then placed in community work placements.

The transition from school to work and adult life requires sound preparation in the secondary school. Besides appropriate vocational training and a program of functional academics, adequate support at the point of leaving school and secure opportunities and services are needed.

On-Site Supervision: A Critical Factor

The amount of on-site supervision is a major factor in whether or not a handicapped student will be successful in an employment situation on a long term basis. Most employers ask for techniques and strategies for working with the handicapped worker. Although we hope that they are treated in the same way as a non-handicapped worker, we know that in some cases modifications may be necessary. Employees need support and training from special education personnel and those responsible for placing and supervising the student. It is no different than in the school situation: the more support provided to classroom teachers, the more successful handicapped students are in the mainstream.

In most school systems, handicapped students are not guided into employment opportunities appropriate for their abilities. There may be several degrees of vocational education/training and experiences available to handicapped youth. These usually lack systematic, planned transition to employment positions in community business. At the same time, communication between school personnel and providers of related services is limited. Preparing handicapped youth for independence and employability in the job market place should be a top priority of school systems.

Along with the development of support services, another aspect affecting the transition from school to work is the need for a functional curriculum. This would

include appropriate training activities, functional academic skills, social skills and supervised work experience.

In a research paper presentation, Dr. Tom Bellemy focused on the employment-related outcomes of education. He states that employment preparation requires:

1. job skills
2. work support skills - personal and social skills necessary to prevent loss of job because of uncontrolled behavior, tardiness, absenteeism, inability to follow instructions
3. ability to make a job choice
4. job mobility and advancement - breadth of training which imparts skills useful across jobs
5. job placement

In the continued search for appropriate evaluation criteria, these five areas could serve as measures of an adequate secondary school curriculum - not only for handicapped students, but for all students desirous of work placement directly out of high school.

Inter-Agency Collaboration

In New Hampshire there are at least three private agencies working very closely with secondary schools interested in providing transitional services (Easter Seals, Transitional Employment Enterprises and Work Opportunities Unlimited). Working with these agencies only will not guarantee that handicapped youth will be successful on a long term basis, but the chances will almost certainly be increased.

As noted above, it is essential that the school provide a functional curriculum and must coordinate other related agencies which reinforce transitional service (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation, Developmental Disabilities, Welfare), in order to maximize the resources available to the individual student/worker. The school should be flexible enough to allow student to spend time during the school day in out-of-school supervised work training as a component of the IEP, and it is imperative that the State Department of Education publicly endorse the transition process as a viable and relevant service delivery system. Support from state officials is necessary in the form of training, leadership, funding, and development of various service models given state and local resources. Collaboration and consideration of creative public-private partnerships can only enhance the liklihood of successful transitions for our handicapped secondary students.

In Summary: Transition From School to Work Model: An Overview

Presented below is an outline of content areas that might be considered for a

comprehensive secondary curriculum, whose purpose is to successfully transition students from school to work.

Junior High School:	functional academics pre-vocational skills
Grades 9 & 10:	functional academics industrial training if available STEP training if available formal vocational assessment (interests/abilities) involvement in In-house work experience program (cafeteria, custodians, office) exploratory Vocational Education class
Grade 11:	functional academics referral to Vocational Rehabilitation exposure to...? full time employment during summer prior to senior year encouraged - many students find own employment or utilize services of Easter Seal, TEE or JTPA.
Grade 12 - Semester:	functional academics social skills curriculum vocational and/or therapeutic counseling

Placement in transitional program on-the-job training, work adjustment training, Work Opportunities Unlimited, could occur during the 11th or 12th year.

In addition, student would successfully complete individual education plans including transition services would then receive a high school diploma and be employed on a full time basis upon completion of this secondary program.

Linkage with support agencies such as Developmental Disabilities, Welfare, etc., would be critical for future involvement (if necessary).

"Transition" can thus be seen as an active, on-going process, with a concrete, specific result: that of placing a handicapped secondary student into a successful employment situation.

Through careful planning, inter-agency collaboration and a commitment to long range goals for that student, secondary special education can share in that students' successes.

Dr. Robert L. Lister is the Secondary Special Education Department Chairman for the Portsmouth School Department. He has written several articles for the Task Force.

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